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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: TAMIL NADU ANALYSIS: CONGRESS-DMK
ALLIANCE STAGES A STUNNING VICTORY

REF: CHENNAI 163

11. (SBU) Summary: The alliance between the Congress Party and the regional DMK party surprised nearly all observers by winning a thumping victory in Tamil Nadu in the recent parliamentary elections. Most commentators expected an opposition led by an alliance of regional and communist parties to gain the lion's share of the state's 39 Lok Sabha seats. Instead, the Congress-DMK alliance won 27 seats, leaving only 12 for the opposition coalition, led by another regional party, the DMK's arch-rival, AIADMK.

12. (SBU) Summary, continued: The opposition parties focused on the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamils (and the Congress-led GOI's inability to help them) as a major campaign issue, but this issue appears to have had little electoral traction, apart from the felling (and near-felling) of a few of Congress's top candidates in the state. Post-election analysis points to the role of a new party, the unexpectedly strong support of religious minorities, the appeal of some of the populist measures undertaken by the current government, the DMK's unparalleled ability to deliver cash handouts to voters, and possible vote-tampering as factors contributing to the Congress-DMK alliance's victory. The DMK's victory has not only won it powerful ministerial positions in New Delhi, it also appears to ensure the survival of its minority government in Tamil Nadu, which relies on the support of the Congress party to remain in power. End Summary.

Solid victory for DMK-led alliance

13. (U) The DMK's alliance turned in an unexpectedly solid performance in the elections, winning 27 of the state's 39 seats. (In the 2004 parliamentary elections, a DMK-led alliance swept all 39 seats, but much of that alliance has since crumbled.) The DMK itself won 18 of the 22 seats it contested, while Congress Party candidates won 8 of the 15 they contested. The VCK (a small party based in northern Tamil Nadu that supports the Dalit, or "untouchable" community), the DMK's only other formal ally in the state, won one of the two seats where it fielded candidates. Altogether, this alliance garnered 42.5 percent of the total votes polled.

Tears for the opposition

14. (U) The opposition to the DMK-led coalition came from an

AIADMK-led alliance, which managed to win only 12 seats and 37.4 percent of the popular vote. The AIADMK itself won only 9 of the 23 seats it contested while its main ally, the PMK (a party strong in the northern parts of the state that was part of the DMK's coalition until recently) lost all 6 constituencies in which it competed. The MDMK (a vocal supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan based terrorist group fighting for an independent Tamil homeland on the island) and the two communist parties (CPI and CPM) each won one seat.

Surprising results

¶5. (SBU) The DMK-Congress victory in Tamil Nadu left even seasoned observers scratching their heads, as nearly all pundits had predicted that the AIADMK and its allies would come out on top. The majority of both Tamil and English media outlets forecast a decisive victory for the AIADMK-PMK-CPM-CPI-MDMK coalition, believing that the "alliance arithmetic" that saw the AIADMK gain allies as quickly as the DMK lost them would reverse the 2004 sweep in the AIADMK's favor. The results stunned even hardened political leaders. Usually never at a loss for words, AIADMK supremo Jayalalithaa, who had planned to go to New Delhi after the vote counting for post-poll alliance talks and to play a possible role as king-maker, remained indoors instead, refusing to meet the press.

What mattered: 1) Cash

¶6. (SBU) Critics of the DMK were quick to point to foul play to explain the party's election success. One very highly ranked member

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of the AIADMK alliance told us that the DMK widely distributed cash to buy votes, and did so on an unprecedented scale, particularly targeting districts where the PMK ran candidates. One Congress leader told us: "The (DMK-Congress) alliance won because of the three Gandhis: Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, and Mahatma Gandhi". (In local parlance, "Mahatma Gandhi" stands for the five hundred rupee notes which bear his picture.)

¶7. (SBU) The scale of this cash distribution was reported widely in Tamil Nadu's media outlets. One of the more audacious distribution networks was reportedly in Madurai (in the central part of the state), where M.K. Azhagiri (son of Chief Minister Karunanidhi and now Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers) scored an impressive win. Local media reported that the DMK was able to insert INR 500-notes (about USD 10, or about two days' wages for a reasonably paid day laborer) into the daily newspaper, delivered directly to voters' homes. Our own contacts, including Congress supporters perhaps jealous of their own party's inability to match the scale of the DMK's cash-handout machine, confirmed these accounts.

¶8. (SBU) Our contacts in the opposition parties told us that the DMK's tactics paid off particularly well in the state's southern constituencies, where the opposition had expected to do well. They also told us that the higher voter turnout in Tamil Nadu (at just over 72 percent, nearly 12 percent higher than in 2004) was also due to the money factor. In Madurai, for example, more than 80 percent of eligible voters cast votes.

What mattered: 2) A new party

¶9. (SBU) Many analysts have suggested that the DMDK, a new regional party led by renowned Tamil film actor Vijayakanth, played a key role in spoiling the AIADMK's chances. Although the DMDK did not win a seat, it scored 10.1 percent of the total votes, and in 14 constituencies, the margins of victory of the DMK-Congress candidates were less than the votes polled by the DMDK. Vijayakanth had cleverly projected himself as a new avatar of Tamil Nadu's legendary (long-deceased) Chief Minister MG Ramachandran (MGR), whose popular goodwill had formed the bedrock of the AIADMK party, leading many to conclude that he drew votes mainly from the AIADMK, to the DMK's benefit. Indeed, a Congress supporter told us that the

DMK even helped finance the DMDK's campaigning, believing that Vijayakanth would take more votes from the AIADMK than he would from the DMK.

¶10. (SBU) There are limits, however, to how far this factor can help explain the election results. In 13 constituencies, the DMK-Congress alliance candidates won more than the votes of the AIADMK alliance candidates and the DMDK candidates put together. In addition, the DMDK did about as well in constituencies where the AIADMK alliance won as it did in the constituencies where the DMK-Congress alliance won, suggesting that it attracted supporters from voters who disliked both the DMK and AIADMK. It also suggests that Vijayakanth's popularity may have contributed significantly to the increased voter turnout.

What mattered: 3) Religious minorities

¶11. (SBU) The AIADMK initially kept its distance from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), at least partially out of fear of alienating Muslim and Christian voters wary of the BJP's pro-Hindu stance. Speculation continued to swirl, however, that Jayalalithaa and her party would happily support a BJP-led coalition at the center, and she allowed this speculation to continue, telling journalists, "A good politician never rules out anything." Some observers contend that this was enough to encourage most of the state's religious minorities to flock to the DMK-Congress alliance. (According to government statistics, Christians and Muslims comprise 12 percent of Tamil Nadu's population, but the actual figure is believed to be closer to 15 percent.) Many members of the clergy of the Church of South India and the Catholic Church openly supported the DMK-Congress coalition, and in one district (Kanyakumari, where about half of the population is Christian), both churches openly endorsed the DMK candidate, fearing that multiple Christian

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candidates would split the Christian vote and allow the BJP's candidate to win.

What mattered: 4) Popular governance

¶12. (SBU) At the state level (the DMK has governed Tamil Nadu since 2006), the DMK has launched a wide variety of populist (and popular) policies and gimmicks, ranging from the sale of rice at INR 1 (USD 0.02) per kilogram and expanding the state's comprehensive school lunch program to fulfilling the party's campaign promise of handing out color televisions to every needy household. DMK leaders have told us that these measures have contributed substantially to the party's success. While critics charge the DMK with turning Tamil Nadu from a power-exporting state into one with a chronic electricity shortage, for example, DMK officials have told us that "the people are not against us," citing the positive impact of their populist programs.

¶13. (SBU) Some Congress Party supporters, however, were quick to tell us about the success of some of their party's programs that helped generate a pan-India pro-Congress wave. In particular, they noted the National Rural Employment Generation program that provided significant extra income to the rural poor and the farm-loan waiver which helped free many farmers from debt traps. These Congress supporters emphasized that the DMK, because of its alliance, was also riding this Congress-generated wave.

What mattered, maybe: 5) Vote tampering?

¶14. (SBU) The leadership of the two main opposition parties in Tamil Nadu (AIADMK and PMK) have also alleged publicly that tampering with the state's electronic voting machines (EVMs) was a major factor in the DMK's victory. PMK Chief Ramadoss demonstrated to the press how a machine similar to the EVMs can be programmed to favor one party over others but journalists were not entirely convinced by the performance. Another PMK official told us privately that technicians have shown him how a skilled person can corrupt an EVM in less than five minutes. The AIADMK even adopted a resolution

calling on the Election Commission to "seriously consider reverting to ballot boxes instead of EVMs which can be fiddled with."

¶15. (U) Rejecting these types of claims, Navin Chawla, India's Chief Election Commissioner, told the editorial board of "The Hindu" (based in Chennai and one of India's major national dailies) that the EVMs are "tamper-proof." He cited the decisions of multiple state-level courts and the Supreme Court to back up this assertion, and went into some detail about the precautions taken to eliminate the possibility that the EVMs can be manipulated.

. . .And what didn't matter

¶16. (SBU) Surprisingly, given the amount of attention it received in the media during campaigning, the issue of Sri Lanka's Tamils and the inability or unwillingness of the Indian Government to put a stop to the fighting in Sri Lanka failed to swing voters. The opposition alliance (particularly the AIADMK and its pro-LTTE allies MDMK and PMK) had made the issue their main campaign plank, as they attempted to blame the DMK and its Congress ally for the GOI's lack of effective action on the issue. Jayalalithaa even told supporters at her campaign rallies that she supported the creation of Tamil Eelam (a separate homeland for Tamils) and that she would force the Government of India to send the Indian Army to aid the Tamils. Voters were unimpressed, however, and the parties with the longest record of active involvement on this issue (the MDMK and the PMK) fared the worst.

¶17. (SBU) While the Sri Lankan Tamil issue was not a big vote-winner in the state, several high-profile Congress Party candidates suffered defeats, reportedly because small, pro-LTTE groups worked feverishly in certain districts to campaign against them. Three former Union Ministers (E.V.K.S. Elangovan, Mani Shankar Iyer, and R. Prabhu) and the President of the Tamil Nadu branch of the Congress Party (K.V. Thangabalu) were among these prominent losers. Current Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram

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himself barely scraped through with a small margin of 3354 votes (see reftel for more details on this controversial victory).

Comment

¶18. (SBU) The surprising result in Tamil Nadu for the parliamentary elections has important local implications. Had the AIADMK alliance, as many expected, done better, it would undoubtedly have attempted to join a coalition government at the center, whether led by the Congress Party or the BJP. This might well have caused the collapse of Tamil Nadu's state government, if Congress had accepted AIADMK support at the center. Instead, the election cemented the DMK-Congress alliance at both levels, and appears to ensure that the DMK will rule Tamil Nadu firmly until at least the next state elections in 2011.

SIMKIN